

# Child-support collections at all-time high

■ Amount up 6 percent from last fiscal year, child services rep says

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The amount of money collected and handed out to parents and guardians by the county's Child Support Services Department is at an all-time high, agency officials announced Wednesday.

The money the department distributed topped \$159 million in child-support payments to parents and guardians during the last fiscal year, a 38 percent jump from five fiscal years ago, agency spokesman John Rosenthal said.

The new numbers are also 6 percent higher than the amount the agency meted out during the last fiscal year, he said. The fiscal

year runs from July 1 to June 30.

The average monthly amount collected per parent is about \$239 as of the end of June, up from about \$215 a year ago, according to agency numbers.

The increase comes at a time when the San Diego County agency — which deals with one of every seven San Diego County families — faces the loss of as much as 20 percent of its staff.

State cuts threatened to force county managers to shave the Child Support Services' 2004-05 budget by from \$54.44 million to \$47.66 million and lay off 124 of its 690 workers.

A new budget deal in Sacramento could dissolve that threat to the department's budget, said Thomas Boardman, director of the Child Support Services agency.

But the loss of staffers remains a threat, Rosenthal said. That's be-

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cause about 80 of the 124 workers, in the face of layoffs, took jobs with other county departments. If those workers decide not to return to the Child Support Services Department, the positions they held will remain unfilled, Rosenthal said.

The county still falls short of the national collection rate, which federal child support officials said was 58 percent in 2002. The local agency has improved its collection rates in recent years. Five years ago, it

collected 27 percent of the child-support money that courts order to be paid in current cases. Rosenthal said that number is up to 41 percent.

Boardman said Wednesday that the increase in the money the agency collects may be in part because Child Support Services divorced itself from the district attorney's office three years ago, a separation mandated throughout the state. As a result, Boardman said, the agency is less inclined to send deadbeat parents to jail. Instead, he said, the agency works with parents who are delinquent and tries to get some payment from them.

The agency has also recent-

ly put into play a number of electronic measures that help collect child support. Parents are now allowed to pay online by credit card.

The agency has collected an additional \$160,000 in credit card payments, Rosenthal said. It's an option some prefer, he said, because paying overdue child support by credit card may be cheaper than enduring the agency's 10 percent interest rate for late payments.

The agency also recently began offering parents and guardians the option of putting the collected money into their bank accounts via direct deposit, which saves labor costs.